

# Professional Development as Social Transformation: The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group

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Professional Development as Social Transformation

*A teacher research group documents their processes and changes over time as they explore the relationships between literacy and social justice in their classrooms.*

In the face of tightening standards and unjust educational reforms, we decided to form a voluntary profes-

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sional development group, The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, to learn from each other, study our own teaching practices, and build socially just communities. In the fall of 2001, Rebecca Rogers and Mary Ann Kramer brought together a diverse group of teachers from various

schools and districts who were deeply committed to exploring the relationships between literacy and social justice. In the spirit of education for social transformation, several questions guided our group: What are the relationships between literacy education and social justice? What is our role as literacy



educators in constructing a more just society? In what ways do a group of educators learn from each other over time? We focus on answering the third question in this article.

tors rather than by the educators who participate in the workshops. This model assumes that *all* teachers are in the same place in their learning and development and that they all need the same type of ex-

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There are several unique aspects of our group of teacher researchers. We are comprised of elementary, secondary, and adult education teachers, and college professors with racial, religious, and socioeconomic diversity. This allows us to think about what it means to learn and teach for social justice across the lifespan. We offer professional development for all teachers from pre-service to those with 60 years of experience. We participate in the group because we are committed to our own learning and socially just forms of instruction.

In this article, we explore the various stages of the teacher research group (early, middle, and recent discussions) to experience what professional development committed to social justice looks like and sounds like over a four-year period. This portrait of professional development—one that includes a diverse and racially integrated group of teachers across the lifespan—illustrates the complex relationships between professional development and social transformation.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Professional development tends to follow a traditional model of “expert-led” workshops on topics that are determined by administra-

periences to extend their learning. In contrast, it is generally accepted that the most effective professional development occurs over time rather than in isolated moments of staff development. This type of professional development supports teachers in making their classrooms and school sites a place where knowledge of practice is generated, connecting their work in schools to larger social issues, and taking a critical perspective on the theory and research of others (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Nieto, 2003).

The critical question is the purpose of professional development and who defines that purpose. If the purpose of professional development is to learn discrete skills, or worse, fulfill a minimum number of hours required by a district, then traditional professional development opportunities are sufficient. “If your aim is to change society,” wrote Myles Horton (1998), “you have to think in terms of which small groups have the potential to multiply themselves and fundamentally change society” (p. 57). Teacher networks, inquiry communities, and other school-based collectives in which teachers collaboratively construct knowledge can create professional development models whose aims are to fundamentally change society

(Allen, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Fecho & Allen, 2003; Fecho, 2000; Hubbard & Powers, 1999; Renda Abu El-Haj, 2004).

Teacher networks and inquiry communities emphasize a model of professional development that accounts for the needs of individual teachers set within a community of learners where peers serve as “more knowledgeable others.” Chandler-Olcott (2002) applied Clay’s (1993) concept of “self-extending systems” to teacher networks. She argued that within the professional development space of a teacher network, teachers learn to monitor their own practice, rely on multiple sources of evidence to make decisions, problem solve with more knowledgeable others (e.g., their peers), make changes in their practice, and generalize these changes to new teaching and learning situations.

## LITERACY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

As members of our teacher research group, we hold assumptions about the relationships between literacy and social equity that are constructed and reconstructed through the various communities in which we participate. Over time, we have constructed some shared assumptions. First, we strive to create literate contexts where our students can gain access to what Delpit (1995) refers to as the “codes of power,” a fundamental and unrealized piece of social equity. Many of our students come from historically marginalized groups that have been denied full access to literacy instruction and continue to be oppressed by racially segregated schools, tracking, and unequal funding. We continually think about how we can facilitate acquisition of the codes of power while at the same time building on

the linguistic and cultural resources that our learners bring into the classroom. We have had many answers to that question that look and sound like culturally relevant pedagogy as advocated by Ladson-Billings (1994).

The challenge we pose to ourselves is how to connect culturally relevant pedagogy with a pedagogy that creates habits of activity within the social world as it is, while at the same time imagining what the world might be—what Collins (1998) refers to as “visionary pragmatism.” We envision critical literacy practices as a type of visionary pragmatism; practices that bridge the aims of *mastering* and *transforming* the codes of power. We understand critical literacy to include the knowledge, strategies, and habits to identify the creators of texts (oral, written, and multi-modal) and their interests, uncover the assumptions related to literate practices, view literacy from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and use literacy to guide action that will create a more just world (Banks, 2004; Richardson, 2003). Because conditions of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism operate at personal, institutional, and systemic levels, we believe we have a commitment as educators to work towards transformation in our communities and schools as well as within ourselves. In this sense, we are in the process of becoming critically literate at the same time as the students with whom we work.

## OUR PROCESS

The Literacy for Social Justice Research Group meets twice a month at an adult learning site in the city. The structure of the meeting is flexible and has changed over time, based on the needs and interests of

the group in popular education style (Horton, 1998). We believe the answers to many of our problems lie within the expertise of the group. Therefore, readings, discussions, observations of videos, and guest speakers address problems we face in our teaching. The group follows a problem-posing/problem-solving model of inquiry. We collect data (e.g., student work samples, audio/video recordings, surveys, transcripts of classroom interactions, test results, and teacher observations), analyze this data as a group and individually, and reflect on possible changes in our instruction. We continually think about links between classroom practice and social actions. This reflective cycle of discussion, planning, implementing, data collection, presenting/disseminating, and action in classrooms and communities is integral to sustaining social transformation. Our first year, we focused on reading articles and books that members of the group thought were relevant to their lives as educators. We collaboratively inquired into the multiple and differently privileged

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definitions of literacy in society and what that meant in our work as educators. We invited several well-known teacher researchers to our group to help us develop our skills. This work set the stage for the second year in which we focused on building the competencies to become teacher researchers in our own classrooms so we could inquire into our own instructional practices. During the second and third years, several members of the group de-

signed classroom research projects and shared this ongoing inquiry with the group. During the third year, we began to disseminate our process and work to other educators by presenting at conferences. Over time, leadership has increasingly been cultivated from within, often from projects that have arisen out of the context of the group. Our Web site provides a detailed timeline and syllabus (<http://artsci.wustl.edu/~mrmosley/lstjtrg/>) for our activities.

From the beginning, we were interested in documenting and studying the multiple layers of our teacher research group. The first layer was the type of inquiry that occurred in classrooms and the changes that resulted from that inquiry. The second layer focused on documenting and learning about the emergence and evolution of a teacher research group. Our data collection and analysis are informed by critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996), which seeks to understand the relationship between language, educational structures, power, and agency. We align ourselves with critical participatory research because we share a value orientation concerned with social inequalities and direct our work towards positive social transformation. We have recorded many of our group meetings on audiotapes and in fieldnotes. To document our group's process and changes over time, we read and reread the notes, transcripts of the meetings, and associated documents (e.g., presentation materials, handouts, syllabus of readings). We also have regular debriefing of meetings that are audio-recorded.

For the purposes of answering our question about what a teacher research group sounds like over time, we followed the methodology used by Lewis & Ketter (2004). We have chosen three transcripts that

represent the beginning (2001–2002 school year), middle (2002–2003), and recent discussions (2003–2004) of our teacher research group to demonstrate how issues shift, community of practice develops, and how learning occurs over the life of the group. We used discourse analytic tools (Gee, 1999) and ethnographic analyses to pinpoint changes in the ways of interacting that occur within the group as well as the discourses, or the content, of the group discussion.

### ENGAGING WITH CULTURALLY RELEVANT INSTRUCTION: THE EARLY DISCUSSIONS

Members of our group settled in around the table at the adult learning center with their refreshments. After announcements, the floor was turned over to two teachers who taught at the same school, Sheila, a third-grade African American teacher, and Rebecca, a student teacher who is Jewish American (fieldnotes 11/01). Rebecca had previously shared data and analysis from her ongoing teacher research project where she was inquiring into

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the home and community literacies of the students in her classroom. Rebecca emphasized connecting students' "funds of knowledge" with the language arts curriculum (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). At the end of the session, Sheila asked the group if she could bring in ideas about her next language arts unit

and get feedback. She explained that she and her students would be reading excerpts of *Tony's Bread* (dePaola, 1989) from the district-mandated basal reader the following week. Following Rebecca's lead, Sheila stated that she wanted to "make it [the literacy curriculum] more relevant to the kids." The following discussion transpired with Becky, a European American college professor:

1. *Sheila: To make it more relevant to the kids, we could talk about the cultures and customs that are important to them and try to bring that connection into the story. I think we could talk about researching a culture and have them make their own timelines.*
2. *Becky: I thought we might take the story and line it up with Sheila's "big idea" and the SS and CA standards. Then, we could come up with some ideas for her classroom.*
3. *Sheila: The manual says that we could start with studying the history of the [Italian section of the city] as a model for studying culture and community and then look at the different restaurants and traditions.*
4. *Rebecca: I think this section of town would be as foreign to your students as any other place. Maybe you can look at their traditions first as far as food and recipes and then connect it to the story.*
5. *Sheila: We could start with their traditions and then go from there, bring them in, write about them, and talk about them.*
6. *Becky: I think it is key to start with their culture first and use that as a bridge to another culture. But a big idea might be something like, "Traditions are power in any community." I started to go through all of my books*

*this afternoon that have to do with food and traditions. Sheila and I talked about how important it is to have multiple copies of the books and you also want the books to be at an instructional reading level for them. Maybe we can look through these books for ideas. What other ideas do you have?*

Sheila's goal was to make the excerpt from *Tony's Bread*, an Italian folktale about a baker and his daughter, manageable and engaging for her students. Becky facilitated the discussion and proposed a "big idea" to guide the curriculum inquiry that Sheila proposed (turn 2). This role of facilitator for Becky and Mary Ann (founders of the group) was representative of early teacher research meetings. They often stepped in by asking the group for responses, bringing in resources, or keeping the group on schedule.

In turn 3, Sheila referred to the teacher's manual that suggested starting by researching the local Italian community. While the guidelines do suggest starting with local culture, rather than the culture of people far removed from the African American children in her third-grade classroom, Rebecca problematized the assumptions underlying this suggestion in the next turn (turn 4). Again, she draws from her project of integrating local literacies into the literacy curriculum. In turn 6, Becky highlighted the importance of accelerative aspects of literacy instruction, (i.e., multiple copies of books that are at an instructional level). She then made a teacherly move and posed a question to the group, "What other ideas do you have?" The discussion continued.

7. *Rhonda: They could find [this section of town] on a city map and you*

could get menus from different restaurants.

8. *Rebecca: Hmm, to use menus as reading materials is a form of unofficial literacies that you could use in the classroom. That would be really interesting. They can write about traditions; a lot of the students in my class wrote about family reunions and the food they ate at the reunions. You combine all of their recipes into a class menu.*
9. *Mary Ann: It can help us to understand the social and political. I don't know how much third graders will understand in terms of what is impacting their lives, but all of these things are interconnected. It sounds like anyone can grow up and open a restaurant but it doesn't happen that way. You might pick how food is political and how three-fourths of our world is starving to death and what does it mean that we all do not have food (transcript 11/01).*

In turn 7, Rhonda, a European American adult education teacher, returned to the idea of researching local Italian culture and suggested that Sheila's class could read menus from different restaurants. Rebecca (turn 8) took up Rhonda's idea and named it "unofficial literacies." Note that Rebecca started her turn with a conversational marker "hmm" that demonstrated a pause before she started talking. Even though she had already stated that teachers should start a discussion of culture with students' own culture, she expanded on what Rhonda noted (turns 7–8). This was a common type of discourse pattern in our early meetings. We would often agree with what had been said and then add our own thoughts, which frequently changed the focus or indirectly challenged something we did not agree with. We read this discourse pattern in

our analysis as a necessary function of building a community of practice where people felt comfortable discussing topics from multiple points of view. This pattern changed in later transcripts.

Rebecca then segued into making connections with students' own culture by writing down recipes from family reunions. In a pivotal turn (9), Mary Ann, a European American adult education teacher, picked up on this thread and proposed the study of food as political. She questioned the developmental appropriateness of this topic in a third-grade classroom and the assumption embedded in the teacher's manual that people are unconstrained by social, racial, and

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economic barriers to open a restaurant. Mary Ann's background in feminism and her deep association with the Navajo culture often framed her analysis from a systemic view.

We came to understand comments such as Mary Ann's about whether or not the topic was appropriate for third graders as signifying a "discourse of developmental appropriateness." This discourse was common for both the adult education teachers and the elementary education teachers early in the group's existence. We questioned whether certain social issues that would be the basis for a critical literacy curriculum could or should be discussed with primary-grade children. While this assumption about the developmental appropriateness of certain topics is not challenged

or problematized here, it resurfaced in later transcripts.

## **LOCATING OURSELVES AND OUR VALUES IN THE CLASSROOM: THE MIDDLE DISCUSSIONS**

An analysis of the articles and books we have read and discussed illustrates that our collective attention moved through the four years from multiple literacies (Heath, 1982; Ruane, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995), to culturally responsive pedagogy (Guy, 1999; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Voss, 1993), to teaching for social justice and critical literacy (Comber, Thompson, & Wells, 2001; Freire, 1970; Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys,

2002; Marautona, 2002; Richardson, 2003). Throughout, we read articles that helped us to think about posing questions, collecting, analyzing, and representing data (Bauman & Duffy, 2001; Hale-Hankins, 1998; Hubbard & Powers, 1993; Wells, 2001). During the middle stage of our group, to which we now turn, we began to explore issues of language, identity, and power more seriously.

We began the session on 5/02 by watching a video called *Building an Anti-Racist Curriculum* (Wolpert, 1999). This movie demonstrated how teachers develop anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-classist curriculum with preschool children. After the movie had been viewed, this interaction occurred between Anne, a Jewish American college student conducting research in an

adult education classroom, Carolyn, an African American adult education teacher, Earline, an African American Reading Recovery teacher, and Mary Ann, a European American adult education literacy coordinator.

1. *Anne: At first I thought it was a little far fetched to give the preschoolers a word of the week like stereotypes.*
2. *Earline: I couldn't believe how when they were shown a picture of a man they would say the occupation was doctor and when shown a picture of a woman, they would say nurse.*
3. *Mary Ann: It raised a lot of good points to work on with children. I was wondering how we could use the video in our adult education classrooms to show the adults.*

After the discussion of the video, Phyllis (African American adult education teacher) and Mary Ann gave a presentation of feminist teaching strategies for literacy education that came from a workshop they conducted called "Women's Self-Development." They highlighted the importance of teachers locating themselves in their teaching practice, the relationships between personal and social transformations, and collaborative learning. Mary Ann modeled, through a narrative, how identity is not fixed but changes based on one's location in shifting relationships. Phyllis shared that her students began to accelerate as readers and writers as they opened up in the classroom.

1. *Rebecca: When you were talking about how a teacher poses their values upfront—that is something that I worry about because even if I try to share power with my students and make it a real community, it is really hard to get away from that power dynamic. The teacher is in power. I worry that I will alienate*

*students who don't feel the same way I do about something. Even if I tell them, "This is just the way I feel. You don't have to agree." So sometimes I tend to keep my values out of the room.*

2. *Earline: But how can you keep your values out?*
3. *Rebecca: I don't know. It's difficult. I just wondered what you thought about it.*
4. *Sara: I also think it depends on the age group. We work with adults. If I attempted to withhold my position, it would hurt my class because they would think that I was not being open and honest with them.*
5. *Rebecca: Well I am worried that they [elementary students] are going to think the same thing. Or they will think, "Well, that's not what my parents think." How can we have authentic instruction if there is not trust between the teachers and the students?*
6. *Mary Ann: Well that is part of the whole location thing, too. You have to be aware that first of all you are an adult and they are children, so automatically there is a power relationship in play. You are trying to understand how they see you and how you are seeing them.*

Rebecca posed the questions about the place of values in the classroom, indicating she felt comfortable sharing something that worried her. Earline, in turn 2, challenged Rebecca's assertion that she can ever keep her values out of the classroom. Sara, turn 4, brought the conversation back to age, again referencing a discourse of developmental appropriateness, and argued that there are differences between adult and elementary education in terms of the teacher's relationship with the students. Rebecca subtly challenged

this discourse by pointing out that it is just as important to have open, trusting relationships with elementary students as with adult education students (turn 5).

Dorothy Walker, an African American adult education teacher who had been teaching for over 20 years, often entered the conversation with narratives from her own teaching experiences.

7. *Dorothy: One time, in my adult education class, we were diagramming sentences in order to bring out the verbs, nouns, and this one girl, she was angry. She came up to me and said, "Mrs. W., my grandmother said that the way you teaching us about the language, well we don't need that, and that's just for other people to talk like that and use that kind of language." This is what she said. She didn't understand why we talked about verbs and how we used them. So I said to her, "You know, I tell you what, ask your grandmother why you are in school. I said just ask her." I then shared a story with my students about a researcher who was advocating for Black English. This was at the same time when I was teaching, you know, during the 1970s when people started to talk about Black English. My students thought that I should be letting them use Black English in the classroom instead of teaching them the standard forms of English. I told them to call this researcher and if the researcher answers the phone and talks with them in Black English, then I will let them go with Black English. Well, they called. And they all came back and said that he didn't talk Black English. Then we had a conversation about who could speak Black English and where (transcript, 5/02).*

This narrative emphasized multiple perspectives on the relationships between language, power, and

social identities. Dorothy's comments reflect a theme that surfaced for many teachers in our group during this time, that is, the power of language and the language of power, specifically an interest in examining multilingual and multicultural as well as the linguistic and discourse features of African American Language. The group invited Elaine Richardson, author of *African American Literacies*, to conduct a workshop for our group to facilitate our inquiry.

This exchange highlights how the ways of representing and the ways of interacting changed from the early to middle discussions. We see evidence that we were becoming more concerned about how we, as teachers, can mediate discussions and learn within critical social issues rather than whether or not such socially sensitive issues are developmentally appropriate for our students. We also see evidence of group members pointing out the synergy as well as the tensions between adult and elementary education. The ways of interacting shifted from that of a formal academic seminar to an informal inquiry group where members felt comfortable challenging each other and opening up with the group in terms of issues and concerns that worry them, personally or professionally. At this

own personal literacy and educational memoirs and timelines that led us deeper into the process of exploring connections between the personal and the political.

## TRANSFORMATIVE CURRICULUM: RECENT DISCUSSIONS

The beginning of the 2003 school year was marked by an outbreak of strikes and protests about public education in the city. The school district hired an independent financial consultant. The consultant embarked on a number of money-saving tactics to reduce the district's debt, including the sale of school buildings (some that were in use), outsourcing janitors and food preparation workers, and eliminating instructional positions. There were articles in the newspapers, protests at school board meetings, and parents who kept their children home from school to protest. This conflict was the backdrop of our discussions, readings, and actions.

We opened up one meeting by discussing the sale of an in-use adult education school building that was marked as "unused" because it was not being used for K-12 education. One of the teachers explained that the students were upset because it was their neighborhood school and

social worlds. We discussed the various options, including writing a letter to the editor, the real estate company, or writing a petition. The students chose to write a letter to the editor which was published in the locally owned and operated African American newspaper and resulted in the school building being taken off the real estate list. We then transitioned into a discussion about following the lead of students with critical social issues.

1. *Becky: We were talking about whether socially sensitive issues can arise out of the literature or whether we can find literature that connects to the sensitive issues we are dealing with in our classes. This comes back to the tensions between adult and elementary education. The purpose of family literacy in elementary education is usually to accelerate the child as a reader. There really isn't an emphasis on the adult. The other difference is that the literacy is always first and the issue is generally secondary or non-existent, except in the cases we have been reading and acting on in here. As you were saying, teachers are often very reluctant to talk about socially sensitive issues in the classroom for a host of reasons.*
2. *Sara: When you say that elementary teachers don't approach this for a host of reasons, of those who have done social justice teaching in their classrooms, and whose students have taken whatever information they have gathered from the discussion home, what is the response of the parents?*
3. *Carolyn: That's a good question.*
4. *Melissa: It depends on the community. Some parents came to me and said, "So and so said you guys were talking about this. Can you tell me*

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time, the teacher research group discourse was characterized by personal anecdotes and reflections on our lives and work within political, racial, cultural, social, and economic contexts. We wrote and shared our

they had no other school to go to. As a group, we wondered how the adult education teacher might structure the literacy events in the classroom so the students might become agents in their

## Looking and Re-Looking at Data: Tools for Constructing Layers of Analysis

Teacher researchers are co-constructors of the everyday life that occurs in classrooms, understanding what it means to look over time at what is being accomplished. When teacher researchers shift from their in-the-moment experiences to a more distanced angle of vision and then back, they often need to look and *re-look* at the data they have collected in order to make sense of what is happening and to take action from what they learn. One way of thinking about looking and re-looking at data over time is as constructing *layers of analysis*.

This process often requires shifts in perspective or angle of vision. The metaphor of the varying powers of a microscope describes this process of constructing layers of analysis by taking multiple perspectives. Using the lowest power of the analytical microscope offers opportunities for the broadest examination—the more distanced “bigger picture” of what is occurring. As each layer of analysis raises new questions that can be posed, new and increasingly focused levels of analysis may be required at higher powers of the analytical microscope.

Videotape records are one source of data that lend themselves to constructing layers of analysis. Sabrina Tuyay (1999) examined the opportunities for learning that were available to students in her bilingual third-grade classroom as they collaboratively constructed planet stories during an astronomy unit:

1. During her first look at the videotape data, she *broadly identified* the possible opportunities for learn-

ing that presented themselves to students over the course of the unit. She *constructed a record* of these that raised questions about how individual students were taking up these opportunities.

2. She re-visited these maps and found *one particular event* in which students were working together during the drafting process. She *constructed a time line* of what occurred on this day that made it evident that one triad of boys spent their time very differently than the rest of the students.
3. By *transcribing the videotape data* and focusing on the actual talk, she saw how these boys interacted during this time.
4. *Looking closely at the face-to-face interactions* between herself and the students and among the students, she saw how these boys took up particular opportunities for learning.

Through this interactive-responsive process of constructing layers of analysis, we can further understand how classroom discourse is shaped and reshaped, what it potentially accomplishes, and with what potential consequences.

Tuyay, S. (1999). Exploring the relationships between literate practices and opportunities for learning. *Primary Voices*, 7(3), 17–23.

Beth Yeager and Sabrina Tuyay  
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more about it?" Some parents said, "Oh it was so cute when Johnny came home and was talking about MLK Jr. and how black people should be able to sit on the bus." So some people posed a question and some people commented because they wanted me to know that their kids were coming home and talking about these things. But no one directly challenged what I was teaching.

5. Carolyn: This brings up an issue that has been in the media surrounding the issue of the racial discrimination on the school bus and the names the young boy was calling the African American girl. If it had been handled better, we wouldn't have this kind of issue. And it's going to escalate. The parents were protesting yesterday and now they are setting the stage for another protest.

6. Sara: It makes teachers uncomfortable to deal with these issues in the classroom. It makes teachers who are learning how to swim flounder, and no one likes to flounder or feel like that, so it is easier to go back to teaching comfortable issues.
7. Louise: Well, your culture protects you from those things.
8. Sara: It is like Howard said in the book [You Can't Teach What You



Don't Know)] *about the CEO from Ohio who said, "I feel like I am a fish who just discovered water. I have been swimming in dominance for so long I wasn't even aware of it." When you are privileged, it is easy to say that you won't address or confront the issues.*

The authority in the group is distributed when teachers call on their own personal and professional experiences. Notice the intertextual references to shared readings and experiences (e.g., turns 1, 4, 8). In turn 4, Melissa answered Sara's question by calling on her classroom research project that inquired into critical literacy in a working class, white, second-grade classroom. Melissa had challenged her students to examine their own whiteness and to work toward a project that was relevant and meaningful in their lives (Rogers & Mosley, 2004). She called on this project, which the group was familiar with, to point out that there is no one parent response. Carolyn picked up on the idea of parent involvement and expressed how parents were protesting against the school board's discipline policies when racist actions were performed by a ten-year-old boy against a ten-year-old girl on the school bus.

At this point in the group, our discussions often wove in and out of the multiple contexts that shaped our work, including local, state, and national policies. Many of the discussions arose because of the diversity of the group's teaching contexts. Bringing perspectives from both suburban and urban, affluent and under-funded schools allowed us to think about differences in funding, tracking policies, teachers' salaries, and other systemic issues. Consequently, there was more explicit naming of racist educational practices and also more

discussion of anti-racist teaching, white privilege, and internalized racism. Concurrently, members of the group were actively reading books on anti-racist teaching and learning, examining white privilege in our own lives, designing and carrying out inquiry in our classrooms, and participating in forms of civil disobedience such as rallies, protests, and marches for protecting civil liberties.

Returning to the discussion, it is no surprise that Carolyn made this connection to current events because she often uses current events and newspaper articles as the basis of her literacy curriculum in her GED classroom. Further, she was simultaneously working on a project in her adult education classroom of form-

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ing and documenting book clubs around the Sister Souljah's (1996) book *No Disrespect*. This was an idea that took root as Melissa shared her process of critical book clubs in a second-grade classroom (Rogers & Fuller, 2004).

Carolyn asked the group if we would be interested in reading and discussing *No Disrespect*, so we each purchased a copy. At the end of our discussion, we donated our copies to Carolyn's classroom. Her class is currently working on putting together a videotape of their book clubs to send to Sister Souljah to demonstrate the impact her writing has had on their lives both in and out of the classroom, another

example of literacy instruction aimed at both mastering and changing the codes of power.

In our analysis of these most recent discussions, we saw an increasing number of perspectives represented in the discussions. There was a shift in content, moving further away from concerns of appropriateness of socially sensitive topics in the primary classroom to more fully engaging with topics and the multiple issues involved. Further, our group discussions are more deeply embedded in the current political and social issues that impact our lives as socially concerned educators.

The ways of interacting in the group also broadened considerably from the early discussions as we move in and out of personal anecdotes, referencing academic literature, making intertextual connections to the research projects we have conducted, and embedding all of this within the current social and political context. In our third year, we seem to move more fluidly between the classroom and community, continually asking ourselves if what we do in our classroom as teachers "counts" enough as social change. Group members at this stage have become more comfortable voicing their unique perspectives. The discussion group continually evolves as our membership changes, often causing us to clarify our discourse and the jargon we use to talk about equity, social justice, literacy, and language.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We have described and interpreted the emergence and evolution of our teacher research group over time. We focused our attention on relatively small excerpts of larger conversations to illustrate the subtle shifts in ways of interacting, the

construction of knowledge, and the themes represented in the group as we worked towards building more socially just spaces. Howard (1999) argued that we cannot expect to understand dominance and its impact on education until we explore the process of knowledge construction. Each member of the group brought a history of participation with schooling, formal education, race, class,

The unique combination of teacher-research projects in adult and elementary classrooms with teachers across the professional lifespan helped to transform ideas about literacy curriculum by moving us outside of our areas of expertise. As we bring data from our classrooms in the form of student writing samples, videotapes, and transcripts to the group to collaboratively analyze

**The different stances of our group caused us to take on multiple perspectives, to reexamine longstanding truths, and to *reconstruct* the stances through which we constructed knowledge.**

and gender that shaped the stances by which we read, interpreted, and challenged practice, and acted in our classrooms and communities. For example, Dorothy, an 80-year-old African American teacher who grew up in the segregated South, earned a teaching degree and then was not allowed to teach because she was married, lived through civil rights demonstrations, and taught for over 30 years, had different beliefs about language and literacy education than Rebecca, a college student who transitioned into her career as a teacher during the course of the teacher research group. Becky's academic background in critical theory, grassroots literacy teaching, and activist work in the community caused her to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions tied to white privilege and provided a different stance than Sara who grew up in the rural South and had not been exposed to diversity until her college experiences. The different stances of our group caused us to take on multiple perspectives, to reexamine longstanding truths, and to *reconstruct* the stances through which we constructed knowledge.

and discuss, we think about learning and teaching for social justice across the lifespan, rather than just in second grade or just in a GED classroom. Consequently, we ask ourselves how the events in second grade might impact a future GED student, and how what a GED student learns might impact a second grader. This type of questioning has caused us intellectual unrest because some of our long-held assumptions about teaching and learning are challenged.

We think there are several reasons why this group emerged and has evolved, with momentum, over time. The type of generative learning and inquiry we have cultivated demands that we have sustained time to read, think, act, and reflect with a community of peers on an ongoing basis. We need time, as our analysis of the transcripts demonstrates, to develop trust and rapport within our emerging community of practice. Together, we decide which books to read, which speakers to bring in, which actions to take. We also learn to ask for support from outside of the group. There are members of the group who are ex-

perienced with designing and implementing research projects that involve collaboration with teachers in their classrooms to collect, analyze, and write research. Such collaborations help to scaffold novice teacher researchers into the details of collecting and making sense of classroom data. Our sporadic funding helps us with professional resources and ways to disseminate our research. The Sociological Initiatives Foundation funded our first and second years. Grants for our third and fourth years have been difficult to obtain, in part, we think, because this is not a well-established (and perhaps controversial in the current political state) form and focus for professional development. Funding for such groups, however, is necessary, and we recommend that schools, universities, and funding agencies consider broadening their concepts of what counts as professional development to include teacher research groups and networks.

Of course, funding requires a conversation about assessing the usefulness of such learning experiences. Traditional assessments of professional development experiences tend to focus on concrete, observable outcome measures such as the increased performance of students on standardized tests. Assessment of innovative professional development networks should match up with the purpose and goals of the group. In the case of our group, we might ask: In what ways have members participated in constructing a more just society? To answer this question, we would point to evidence of how we have made changes in our personal lives, in our lives as educators, and in our lives as citizens. We agree with Cochran-Smith & Lytle's (2001) assertion that professional develop-

ment for the next century “should be understood not as a personal and professional accomplishment but as a lifelong stance and a long-term collective project with a democratic agenda” (p. 56).

Recently, in searching for similar teacher networks, we located the Chicago Teachers for Social Justice group (<http://www.teachersforjustice.org/aboutus.php>), and have found a great amount of inspiration, particularly from Jesse Senechal who conducted a workshop with our group during the summer of 2004. We have started to think of ourselves as a network of and for progressive educators, especially those who are struggling to construct just practices within unjust social structures. We started the 2004 academic school year with a workshop on how educators can get involved with the presidential campaign and social change. The Dismantling Racism Institute (<http://www.nccj.org/>) facilitated our inquiry toward building anti-racist classrooms, schools, and communities in October. In November, we traveled to attend the Chicago group’s annual curriculum fair, and we plan to have our first curriculum fair in the Spring of 2005. We have also generated a list of materials and resources on our Web site that may help facilitate such conversations and actions that we believe may be useful for other educators who are interested in starting their own progressive network. We realize that there is no one way to teach for social justice. The numerous inquiry projects and the multiple experiences of the teachers in the group allow us to problem-pose and problem-solve as a group and to theorize about how these issues impact our own classrooms and communities.

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## CALL FOR 2005 DONALD H. GRAVES WRITING AWARD NOMINATIONS

### Overview

Established in 2001 by Donald H. Graves, this award annually recognizes teachers in grades 1–6 who demonstrate an understanding of student improvement in the teaching of writing. The award is administered by the NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee, which selects an award recipient from the portfolios and essays submitted during the year. If the Committee feels that no significant portfolios or essays have been submitted, the award may be postponed until the next year. The award is presented at the Elementary Section Get-Together during the NCTE Annual Convention. The winner is briefly recognized and given a cash award of \$2,000 U.S. funds.

### Submission Process

Submission information can be found on the NCTE Web site at <http://www.ncte.org/elem/awards/graves>. Submission materials must be postmarked no later than **June 1, 2005** and be mailed to: NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Results will be announced in September 2005, and the award will be presented at the 2005 Annual Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during the Elementary Level Get-Together.